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Turkmenistan's Attempted Coup: Repercussions and U.S. Concerns

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Summary

Turkmenistan's President Saparamurad Niyazov announced on November 25, 2002, that assassins had just tried to kill him, and alleged that several prominent expatriate oppositionists had been aided at least tacitly by neighboring countries in hatching the attempted coup. The United States, international human rights organizations, and others have raised strong concerns about apparent human rights abuses committed by the Turkmen government in pursuing the coup plotters. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia's New States*, and CRS Report 97-1055, *Turkmenistan*.

Background

Since the 1980s, Turkmenistan has been ruled by strongman Saparamurad Niyazov, whose cult of personality includes such titles and accolades as "Turkmenbashi the Great" (father of all Turkmen). According to the U.S. State Department, Turkmenistan is among the most authoritarian of the former Soviet republics, with the government frequently violating civil and human rights. The former communist party is the only one permitted and all dissent is harshly suppressed. Some oppositionists who have fled Turkmenistan have formed a People's Democratic Movement, headed by former prime minister and former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov, ex-deputy prime minister and former Central Bank chairman Khudaiberdy Orazov, and former ambassador to Turkey Nurmukhamed Khanamov. This group states that it supports democratic reforms and the peaceful replacement of Niyazov. The Niyazov government has viewed many of the expatriate oppositionists as criminals and terrorists, and has called for host governments to apprehend and extradite them to Turkmenistan for prosecution.¹

¹ Sources for this report include the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Newsline*; *Eurasia Insight*; *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*; *Central Asia Monitor*; and State Department and wire service reports.

There have been some recent signs of rising popular and elite discontent with Niyazov's rule within Turkmenistan, such as protest rallies against poverty, the anonymous distribution of anti-regime leaflets, and a large-scale purge of security officials, but in general, Turkmenistan has appeared to be under Niyazov's firm control. This appearance of stability was shattered on November 25, 2002, however, when Niyazov announced that he had been the target of an alleged assassination attempt that morning while on his way to work. Curiously, he stated that he had been unaware until arriving at work that the attack had occurred, but that it had involved a firefight with his motorcade during which several police had been wounded or killed. He asserted that Turkmen security agents had already discovered that four prominent opposition figures who had fled the country – Shikhmuradov, Orazov, Khanamov, and former agriculture minister Imamberdy Yklymov – were its prime organizers. He stated that several of the local attackers already had been arrested and that demands for the extradition of expatriate suspects had already been sent to foreign governments. Niyazov's presidential spokesman the next day asserted that the assassination attempt constituted international terrorism. All four opposition leaders immediately issued denials of responsibility and Yklymov called for Niyazov to release two dozen detained relatives.

Most observers have accepted the Turkmen government's claim that a coup attempt in fact took place, but opinions differ on the reasons for the coup attempt. Rising poverty and popular discontent over authoritarian policies and corruption are probable factors, as are tribal and clan schisms in Turkmen society. Struggles for control over revenues from energy exports and drug trafficking may be in play. Some observers have speculated that some interests in Russia and other neighboring states may be encouraging Niyazov's departure from power, including some Uzbeks concerned over Turkmen water and border policies and Russian energy interests aiming to enhance their control over Turkmenistan's natural gas resources and export routes.

Coup Repercussions

Immediately after the attempted coup, the Turkmen government orchestrated massive rallies and media support for Niyazov's rule. During televised rallies of thousands of government officials and supporters on November 27-28, speakers contended that the relatives of the accused and foreigners were heavily involved and demanded death penalties. On December 2, 2002, Turkmen Chief Prosecutor Kurbanbibi Atadzhanov asserted that the coup attempt had involved months of intricate plotting, with Shikhmuradov, the key plotter, providing forged passports and visas to hired assassins who were sent to Turkmenistan and were hidden by Turkmen businessman Guvanch Dzhumayev. Dzhumayev, whose opposition newspaper had been closed by Niyazov in the early 1990s, was accused of personally directing the assassination attempt. In a sensational televised "confession" the next day, he "repented" for his role in the plot, and stated that he was "ready for execution." Indicating a clan aspect to the round-ups, Niyazov announced on December 5 that about two dozen of the "Dzhumayevs, Shikhmuradovs, Yklymovs, and Khanamovs" had been detained, but asserted that they were merely the pawns of foreign governments that were "envious" of Turkmenistan.

As part of the campaign to round up alleged coup plotters, several prominent former and present Turkmen officials were arrested, including Tagandurdy Hallyyev, a legislator, and Batyr Berdiyev, a former foreign minister and ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Some observers speculated that Hallyyev

– who had been a former legislative (Mejlis) Speaker, a Justice Minister, and a presidential security advisor – had fallen into Niyazov’s disfavor after being linked to officials purged earlier from the security apparatus, and that the coup attempt provided a convenient pretext for his jailing. Hallyyev was accused of being another prime organizer of the coup attempt and was stripped of his legislative mandate by the Mejlis on December 12. Indicating that the wide-ranging round-ups continue, environmental activist Farid Tuhbatullin was arrested in late December on charges of conspiring with the coup plotters, charges many human rights organizations have disputed.

On December 18, Turkmen Prosecutor Atadzhanov announced that dozens of alleged coup plotters would be tried on charges of attempted assassination, conspiracy to overthrow the constitution, terrorism, attempted murder, arms smuggling, and other crimes. She reported that one group of conspirators planned to attack the motorcade, another to seize the Mejlis building to convene a meeting to transfer power, and a third to take over state media to broadcast a speech by Shikhmuradov announcing that he was the new president and speaker of the Mejlis. Allegedly, Shikhmuradov promised the plotters that they would be awarded posts as deputy prime ministers or legislators. When the attack on the motorcade failed, the other two groups went into hiding. During the television broadcast of Atadzhanov’s report, clips showed more confessions, with Atadzhanov boasting that all the plotters “have admitted as one that they were only the executors of a criminal scenario worked out by Shikhmuradov.”

In the days after her report, Turkmen media launched intensified appeals for the citizenry to turn in more conspirators. Shikhmuradov’s whereabouts were uncertain in the days after the coup attempt, but the government eventually discovered that he was in Turkmenistan and launched a manhunt that resulted in his capture on December 26 (he has maintained that he turned himself in). A few days later, in a televised confession on December 29, Shikhmuradov stated that he had been involved in the coup attempt, that he was a heroin addict, that all so-called political opponents of Niyazov were merely criminals, that he had embezzled, and that he was a “non-entity ... without intelligence or experience” until Niyazov had hired him.² His relatives and supporters dismissed the statement as coerced and an attempt by Shikhmuradov to protect his family. The next day, the Supreme Court quickly tried and sentenced Shikhmuradov, Orazov, and Khanamov (the latter two in absentia) to 25 years in prison. However, in an extraordinary meeting of the quasi-legislative People’s Council later that day, Niyazov led the body to proclaim life sentences for the three and to warrant such sentences for those convicted of “betrayal of the Motherland” in the future.

U.S. and International Concerns

The U.S., Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, Uzbekistani, and Turkish governments have protested against Turkmen government accusations that they or their citizens have abetted the would-be coup plotters. Turkmenistan’s relations with Uzbekistan seriously deteriorated following accusations by Turkmen officials that Uzbekistan was heavily involved in the coup attempt. Turkmen police raided the Uzbek embassy on December 16, an action not only protested by Uzbekistan but internationally as a violation of the sanctity of diplomatic premises. Turkmenistan subsequently expelled the Uzbek

² *FBIS*, December 30, 2002, Doc. No. CEP-148.

ambassador, alleging that he helped spirit Shikhmuradov into Turkmenistan and sheltered him after the coup failed. Turkmen-Uzbek tensions rose further as each stepped up deployments of troops along mutual borders. The Russian government strongly protested Turkmen allegations that it tacitly supported the coup attempt, and dispatched one of its top officials, Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushailo, to talk to Niyazov in early January 2003. The two sides reported that relations had been improved. Other international moves by Turkmenistan in subsequent days to at least partially patch up relations with its neighbors included an energy cooperation agreement it signed with Uzbekistan in mid-January, although at the same time it tightened border controls.

Despite the swirl of the Turkmen coup investigation and questions about Turkmenistan's stability, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali traveled to Turkmenistan in late December 2002 to sign a cooperation accord on building a natural gas pipeline. While these leaders appeared eager to inaugurate the building of a pipeline, international financiers have so far balked, pointing to lingering instability in Afghanistan. The apparently increasing civil unrest in Turkmenistan, including the coup attempt, seems likely to heighten these concerns, although the Asian Development Bank on December 20 nonetheless granted funds for a feasibility and risk study of the pipeline. Turkey's interest in retaining good relations with Turkmenistan was illustrated by a visit by Turkish Justice and Development Party head Recip Tayyap Erdogan in early January 2003. Erdogan's talks with Niyazov included energy and other trade issues.

Myriad human rights organizations, as well as countries and international organizations have protested Turkmenistan's human rights record in responding to the coup attempt. On December 12, the then-Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Antonio Martins da Cruz, raised concerns about reports of torture, lack of legal access for the accused, and the detention of relatives of the accused, and called for Turkmenistan to permit the OSCE to examine the investigative record. Denouncing the "Stalinist-style" broadcasts of so-called confessions on Turkmen state-owned media, an OSCE official also stated that same day that such broadcasts appeared designed by the regime "to humiliate and terrorize anybody" in Turkmenistan who might question Niyazov's rule. Prominent Russians also criticized Niyazov's abuses, including deputy speaker of the Duma (lower legislative chamber) Vladimir Lukin, who on March 4 termed the regime "hideous."³

The United States has been at the forefront in urging the OSCE and other Western organizations and governments to use their diplomatic resources to express dissatisfaction with human rights conditions in Turkmenistan and to urge it to abide by its OSCE and international commitments. The U.S. mission to the OSCE on December 12 called for the OSCE to invoke its "Moscow mechanism," a request that Turkmenistan provide information to the OSCE on the "whereabouts and charges" against all those detained in connection to the coup attempt within ten days. The United States highlighted its concerns about reports of arbitrary detentions, the confiscation of property, torture, and the lack of consular access to U.S. citizen and businessman Leonid Komarovskiy, an accused coup accomplice. Following-up on December 19, the United States reported that

³ OSCE. Press Release. *CiO Regrets Ashgabad Violence, Urges Turkmenistan to Conduct Restrained, Open Investigation*, December 11, 2002; *FBIS*, March 5, 2003, Doc. No. CEP-433.

Turkmenistan had provided only a partial reply to the OSCE request, and raised concerns about new detentions and the violation of diplomatic premises. Given these circumstances, the U.S. mission stated, interested OSCE members would additionally request that Turkmenistan permit a fact-finding mission to visit to ascertain whether those detained in connection with the coup attempt were being treated in accordance with international human rights standards.⁴ Turkmenistan refused to permit the mission to visit, but in late February 2003 it prepared a report on the Turkmen government's conduct after the coup attempt that it forwarded to Turkmen officials. Under the Moscow Mechanism, Turkmenistan is invited to respond to the report. It will be discussed by the OSCE Permanent Council in mid-March and, if adopted, may become grounds for possible sanctions. *Reuters* reported on March 3 that a copy of the OSCE report it obtained stated that "large-scale violations of all the principles of due process of law" took place after the coup attempt, including arbitrary detentions, "show trials," and the use of torture and drugs to obtain confessions.

On March 3, 2003, Niyazov met with visiting Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, who urged Niyazov to respond to the OSCE report. He also urged that OSCE representatives be permitted to observe future trials and that family members be allowed to visit convicts. He raised concerns about the detention of Tuhbatullin. Niyazov stated that Tuhbatullin would soon be released, de Hoop Scheffer reported. The next day, however, Tuhbatullin was sentenced to a 3-year term, an outcome condemned by many international observers. Indicating increasing shrillness, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry on March 5 denounced some Western reports of de Hoop Scheffer's visit that it claimed maligned Turkmenistan, stating that such media had been bribed to lie.

Among the heightened U.S. concerns about human rights conditions was the admission by Turkmenistan on December 3, 2002, that it had been holding U.S. citizen Komarovsky as a coup suspect. The State Department spokesman immediately protested the delayed notification and the failure to provide timely consular access, terming them clear violations of international law. U.S. concerns were heightened on December 18 when Turkmen television showed pre-recorded footage of Komarovsky pleading that he had been inadvertently "among those who prepared a plot." Ominously dismissing the plea, Turkmen Prosecutor Atadzhanov asserted that Komarovsky had helped the plotters draw up planned post-coup propaganda. His family has denied that he supported the coup attempt. U.S. concern about the safety of U.S. citizens was indicated on December 23 with the issuance of a travel warning urging Americans to "carefully evaluate travel to Turkmenistan," because of its heightened security climate.⁵

U.S. Policy Considerations. A dilemma for U.S. policy has been weighing strong objections to human rights violations in Turkmenistan against the need to sustain U.S. interests in the country and the region, including in Caspian energy development, Turkmenistan's support for U.S.-led coalition actions in Afghanistan, other counter-terrorism efforts, and non-proliferation. U.S.-Turkmen relations have cooled somewhat

⁴ U.S. Department of State. *Concern About Arrests in Turkmenistan: Statement Delivered to the OSCE Permanent Council*, Vienna, December 12, 2002; *Continued Concern About Turkmenistan*, December 19, 2002.

⁵ U.S. Department of State. Office of the Spokesman. *Public Announcement: Turkmenistan*, December 23, 2002.

in recent months, with the Niyazov government moving to limit some U.S. as well as other Western civil society assistance, viewing such aid as at least tacitly fostering rising opposition activities. Relations may cool further if the Niyazov regime refuses to address U.S. concerns and continues its human rights abuses. As recently as August 2002, visiting U.S. Central Command head Tommy Franks had praised Turkmenistan's support for the coalition, but the Niyazov government might decide to limit overflights and refueling operations and the trans-shipment of humanitarian aid by coalition partners to Afghanistan. On the other hand, the Niyazov government's desire to build a gas pipeline through Afghanistan might well dispose it to continue to facilitate coalition actions. The U.S. Administration has stated that it supports the building of such a pipeline, and also has encouraged Turkmenistan to join in efforts to build a trans-Caspian gas pipeline to join up with a proposed Azerbaijan-Turkey gas pipeline.

Perhaps indicating a further cooling of U.S.-Turkmen relations, the Turkmen government on January 8, 2003, reacted harshly to the State Department's late December 2002 statement by issuing an open letter ostensibly written by the editors of sixteen state-owned newspapers and the State News Agency. The letter's publication in the state-owned press and its dissemination by the Turkmen Foreign Ministry indicated Niyazov's imprimatur. It termed the State Department's concerns "lying fabrications," and a "knife stabbed into the heart," at a time when Turkmenistan is assisting the United States in combating terrorism in Afghanistan. Ominously hinting at possible diplomatic repercussions, the letter accused the U.S. ambassador of "unseemly deeds" and an "unfriendly attitude," and implied that she colluded with the Uzbek ambassador in hiding Shikhmuradov. It also alleged that the U.S. embassy disseminated "dirty libel" and "slander" about the coup investigation to Turkmen media, terming such actions a "slandorous attack by one country against another [that] can only be regarded as an attempt to worsen relations." On March 6, relations seemed further strained when the State Department issued a statement "deploring" Tuhbatullin's conviction as "politically motivated," and calling for his immediate release. The State Department asserted that others had been politically targeted who also appeared to have no connection to the attempted coup. One positive aspect of U.S.-Turkmen relations is Turkmenistan's continued permission for international aid trans-shipments to Afghanistan.

Congress supported increased U.S. aid and other engagement with Turkmenistan after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States in large part because of Turkmenistan's support for U.S.-led coalition efforts in Afghanistan. However, concerns about human rights abuses in Turkmenistan led some in Congress even before the recent coup attempt, as well as afterward, to call on the Administration to more closely link the continuation of enhanced U.S. ties on Turkmenistan's commitments to democratization and respect for human rights.⁶

⁶ 107th Congress. 2d Session. S.J.Res. 50, Expressing the Sense of the Senate With Respect to Human Rights in Central Asia, *Congressional Record*, October 17, 2002, pp. S10728-S10729. 108th Congress. 1st Session. S.J.Res. 3, *CR*, January 14, 2003, pp. S304-S305.